

Ripped from the ROUNDUP

Ripped straight from the pages of old Space News Roundups, here's what happened at JSC on this date:

1 9 6 4

The largest solid propellant rocket motor segment cast to date in the Free World rolled uneventfully last month over 25 miles of Southern California freeway and side streets from its manufacturing plant to the base where it will be test-fired in the fall.

Carried horizontally on a massive trailer over 100 feet in total length, the 140-ton center segment of Lockheed Propulsion Company's 156-inch diameter rocket motor is nearly 24 feet long. The additional length of the carrier vehicle is required to spread the weight over 64 wheels on eight axles.

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NASA will retrieve the Palapa B-2 communications satellite and return it to Earth on Space Shuttle Mission 51-A in November under the terms of an agreement signed Aug. 13.

The Palapa is in a circular orbit between 180 and 190 nautical miles. The *Discovery* will move in and keep about 200 feet from the satellite as the prime EVA crewmember flies over to the satellite with a Manned Maneuvering Unit. Astronauts Dale Gardner and Joe Allen are slated for the EVA tasks. Palapa B-2 was deployed from the Shuttle *Challenger* during STS-41B on Feb. 6.

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Voyager 2 began its close encounter with Neptune this week, sending hundreds of images Earthward daily. As the aging spacecraft began its grand finale, it revealed tantalizing details about the planet and its two largest moons that, in some cases, refuted conclusions of just two weeks ago.

In the past few weeks scientists have discovered a magnetic field around the planet, located four moons to add to the two already known through observations from Earth, and confirmed the presence of previously predicted ring arcs (partial rings).



Deborah Mika treats nephew, Alex Conaway, 7, to a close-up look at the space shuttle cockpit trainer. JSC Photo S99-08413

Deborah Mika: *dynamo with a deft touch*

By Mary Peterson

Deborah Mika is today's woman: smart, ambitious, energetic, career minded, goal oriented, and with a built-in sense of diplomacy that would rival Henry Kissinger. She's Clark Kent in femme shoes, and, like Kent, you half expect her to chuck her horn-rimmed glasses, don a cape, and leap tall buildings. She also has a soft side. But, more on that later.

So, it's not surprising that when JSC needed a superhero to conquer the mountains of VPP work, and in not much time, Mika (pronounced Mee-kah), the safety projects lead for Hernandez Engineering, Inc., was tapped for the job.

"It was a big challenge," said Mika, "and I was still pretty new to JSC. My predecessor had left for another company, so there was very little opportunity for transition. And, wow! Trying to motivate and educate some 13,500 people in a complex like JSC could make anyone's knees turn to rubber."

But, rise to the task she did, and she was instrumental in getting the VPP application produced on time, along with organizing the 19-element exhibit books, and subsequently working with Bill Klingbeil, the OSHA VPP Region VI manager, during the all-important on-site audit. She, in fact, worked so well with the OSHA-VPP group that Klingbeil invited her to join their team in other external audits, as time permits.

Mika has a rare talent for assessing situations, organizing a strategy, setting goals, and eliciting the best from coworkers to achieve an end, all the while making them feel good about themselves and what

they've accomplished together. Where did this ability come from? "Probably from growing up in a large family," she will tell you. "You learn a lot about give and take, and, well, how to negotiate. If I wanted my little brother to fix my car, for example, I would make an offer – something like, 'I'll iron your shirts for two weeks.' If he said 'no' to this, I'd say... 'and give you an extra 10 bucks for the dance on Friday.' Most of the time it worked. You learn to consider the feelings and needs of others."

Beyond the tough, professional exterior, Mika's soft side is manifest at the very mention of her 7-year-old nephew, Alex Conaway, who has been the object of her intense attention and affection since what could have been a life-altering freak accident. "He was playing and fell on a shovel," Mika recalls, "piercing his right ankle." From the wound, a fungus developed, ultimately causing bacteria to grow in the hematoma and eat away at the ankle bone, raising the ominous possibility of crippling, or in the worst case, amputation below the knee.

Even at the early age of 6, when the injury first occurred, young Alex perceived that his would not be an easy road. In an especially poignant moment, he asked his mom, "Would you miss me?" Pretending not to understand, she replied, "Alex, I don't know what you mean." He said, "Well, you know, if I died, you really would miss me." After tender hugs and reassurances, the young boy was able to accept the risk of nine subsequent surgeries with courage and a positive attitude. Although he tires easily and relies occasionally on crutches, Alex

has emerged the typical, mischievous little boy, yet well-tempered and well-mannered. "He's my hero," says Mika, "although," she added, "he thinks I'm his."

Alex, so proud of his Aunt-Who-Works-at-NASA, is not above telling his friends he "thinks" she's an astronaut. If not one, she comes close in his books. When in the hospital, Mika took him some space food that included pizza and an ice cream sandwich, along with posters, a play shuttle, and other space stuff. Alex thumbs-downed the pizza, even though, in his words, "I usually like pizza a lot," but gave an A-OK on the ice cream sandwich. And, to cap off his space fantasies, Aunt Deborah hosted him, his mom, and younger sister, Aimee, 6, on a recent tour of JSC, so he could see the real thing. Equally important, Alex wanted to personally thank his aunt's coworkers who kept him in their prayers.

Mika, whose career moves have taken her from the nuclear weapons industry to the space industry, has lived and worked in Nevada, Colorado, and now Texas. She was born in Karnes City, Texas, near San Antonio, and has a degree in business administration from University of Houston and a master's degree in environmental policy and management from the University of Denver.

Where does Mika see herself in 10 years? "With a satisfying career and a happy home life," she says. Single, she looks forward to the day she will have an Alex of her own, maybe more, although she admits, "There will always be only one, true Alex in my heart." ■

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